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ABSTRACT

It is often the case that lip service is paid to the strength of indigenous culture while the implications of indigenous peoples' strengths are disregarded in actual project design. This paper shows that indigenous peoples and societies are able to cope with an extraordinary number of permutations, and that their coping mechanisms are both infinitely resilient and enormously adaptable. The most obvious strength and resource of African children is the extended family. Other strengths and resources available to African infants and young children through their indigenous socialization processes include the structure of the siwindhle, or nursery, and the role of old women in imparting social knowledge to the children. The everyday socialization process that takes place around an African child is too significant to be ignored, and there is a need for a deeper and more intimate understanding of the invisible social fabric that holds the society together. Once the context of African socialization is understood, then the ability to use the African institutions developed expressly to facilitate child development will naturally follow. Teacher training institutes must develop respect for traditional practices so that new teachers cease to think of themselves as the ones with knowledge and become sensitive to other socializing agents in the community. (SM)

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Building on people's strengths: the case for contextual child development

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Editorial history

This paper was originally commissioned by the Bernard van Leer Foundation to be presented at a Regional Seminar, staged in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Lesotho, in Maseru, Lesotho on 25-30 November, 1991. The seminar, entitled 'Child development in Africa: building on people's strengths' brought together some 50 people representing early childhood development programmes in Africa, as well as academics, policy makers and representatives of international, governmental and non-governmental organisations concerned with the care and education of young children. A publication based on the outcomes of the seminar will be published separately by the Foundation.

About the author

Gerry Salole is the Sub-Regional Director for Southern Africa for Save the Children Federation (USA). Based in Zimbabwe, he is responsible for that country, Malawi and Mozambique and has primary responsibility for exploring Save the Children's possible future involvement in South Africa, Namibia and other neighbouring countries. He has been Field Office Director for Save the Children in Zimbabwe and in Ethiopia and has previously worked for Redd Barna (Norwegian Save the Children) and for Oxfam (UK). He was born in Ethiopia and has a doctorate in Social Anthropology from the University of Manchester, UK.

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BUILDING ON PEOPLE'S STRENGTHS: THE CASE FOR CONTEXTUAL CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Start with what they know,
Build with what they have.
Lao Tsu 700 BC

Situational versus contextual development

It is good to start with one's biases: this paper is based on the premise that one cannot go far wrong in development if one is building on institutions which have been dreamed up, erected, modified, maintained, and improved upon by generations of ordinary people who have had to cope with merely 'living'.[1] It may be an easy and glib thing to say, and in the current development orthodoxy it would be difficult to imagine anyone disagreeing vehemently with this premise. It has, of course, become somewhat axiomatic that lip service is paid to the *strength* of indigenous culture while, in practice, the implications of recognising people's strengths are disregarded for project design.

It is an integral part of the effectiveness and resilience of coping mechanisms and strategies that they are not conspicuous: if they were obtrusive they would hamper efforts to get on with life and be much less effective than they are known to be. Recognizing and enhancing people's innate strength is, therefore, essentially a question of being prepared to look and listen for hidden strengths, to suspend facile judgement, and the conscious development of an ability to interpret circumstances without imposing one's own solution. Pantin's comments about listening are appropriate here:

> First, you get in there and listen to the people. You listen to them for periods varying from a year to three years before attempting any organized project. In fact, even when you start doing something with them, you never stop listening. You listen until you are tired of listening and then you listen some more. You listen until all the cultural arrogance has been drained from your mind and you really begin to hear the voice of the people as the important element in their own development and as far more important than the wonderful schemes and ideas that are turning around in your busy little brain. *(Pantin 1989: p 21)*[2]

This paper advocates an approach that is termed *contextual development* to distinguish it from the more usual approach described here as *situational development*. Since much of what follows hinges upon what may, to some, seem too subtle or academic a distinction, a few words need to be said about the differences between contextual and situational development.

1. This is not to say, of course, that all the cultural and traditional beliefs of all peoples are beneficial and that there are no harmful beliefs. The fact that there are unpalatable customs does not mean, however, that one can ignore the results of painstaking improvisation and fine-tuning that result from natural adaptation to situations.

2. Sometimes ordinary people are able to warn you of your own arrogance directly. In my first week of anthropological fieldwork someone slipped a poem into the house I was living in. It was extremely disconcerting to be warned thus: 'they'll have told you about the dances and costumes/ they'll have told you about our songs/ they'll have told you, for a special occasion/ at little cost you can hire them!/ but they haven't told you of our language that they can't get us to abandon/not to hear it anymore, the colonialists/ will have to kill us all!/ If you come to understand us, Welcome! and leave your paternalism at home./ But if you come entrenched in racism,/ t'would be better your not coming at all'.

The dictionary definitions give a sense of the fundamental difference between these two approaches. *Context* is defined as 'the parts of a discourse or treatise which precede and follow a special passage and may fix its true meaning: associated surroundings, setting'. *Situation* is defined as 'location, place, a juncture: a critical point in the action of a play or the development of the plot of a novel, office, employment'. Contextual development, therefore, implies not dealing with a perceived problem piecemeal but imposes a serious prerequisite of 'taking in' the environment in which the problems or crisis unfold. This is more than a mere adage to understanding the milieu one operates in: it is more a question of being sufficiently familiar with the nuances and subtleties that obtain and requires, when done right, an intimacy with the context which can only be arrived at after painstaking familiarisation with concomitant issues and problems. There is really nothing new about being sensitive to what is going on before one tries to improve it. It is a recurrent and consistent motif in all that follows that to build on people's strengths one must operate in a contextual rather than a situational mode.

The myth of fragile coping mechanisms

Despite abundant evidence to the contrary, there appears to be a distinct tendency for development workers to fall back to a position which assumes (and therefore reinforces) the basic fragility of the traditional coping mechanisms of the communities they are dealing with. This approach is most vividly illustrated by the trend to gratuitously refer to the poor as *victims* and the stress, implied or explicit, on the need to *rescue*, or *save* them from misery and desperation. Thus, as Pantin (1989: p 27) points out, whenever we *help* people by doing something *for* them we are telling them indirectly that they are incompetent and incapable of helping themselves.

It is significant that the myth of weak traditional coping mechanisms persists despite examples of resilient and ingenious structures routinely thrown up by the poorest and most vulnerable people. Such examples include those quintessential coping and socialisation mechanisms, the voluntary associations: *Tontines*; burial associations; rotating credit and savings clubs; self-help groups (Salole 1991a).

There continues to be a need on a routine daily basis for poor people to plan, save, cope with the unexpected and generally make ends meet. Ordinary people are obliged to continue to do these things without rarifying them and it is true to say that these responses are often undetectable unless one is consciously looking for them. It seems as if the positive and successful aspects of the everyday life of the poor are continuously overlooked as if they were indeed invisible. There is, moreover, a tendency to focus on much more discernible 'change', usually possible with new resources brought in from outside. It is not surprising that much emphasis, if one can be forgiven a lapse into an architectural analogy, is put on the debris of the collapsing structure and on the pristine imported plastic that will replace it, but no attention is given to the weakened but exquisite edifices still standing. The collapsing structure seems destined to be replaced by new 'modern' substitutes and there is little thought given to the fact that the very act of putting up completely new structures is damaging and harming some of the older structures that are still standing.

In extreme cases, this underestimation of the ability of ordinary people to deal adequately with problems can lead to projects that are theoretically designed to 'help', but that are actually counterproductive and detrimental to the beneficiary. A recent example of such a tendency to deal situationally with a problem is currently being experienced in Rakai and Masaka regions in southwest Uganda where there appears to be a growing problem of AIDS orphans. Despite the considerable strain that this new phenomenon is placing on the structure, it appears, at least for the present, that for the most part the traditional coping

mechanism (in this case: the extended family) continues to cope. The structure is essentially intact. Some of the actors persist, however, in focusing on the ruptures in the fabric and appear to cling to the stubborn belief that the extended family, stretched to the limit, is in danger of instantaneous laceration. Predictably, some well-meaning child-focused organisations have leaped to the fatal conclusion that they should *anticipate* the collapse and breakdown of the coping mechanism. One can thus witness frenetic attempts to establish orphanages and children's homes.[3] These efforts should be interpreted as counterproductive since they represent magnets that offer rival services, or competition, to those of the extended family, thereby lengthening the odds against the ability of the extended family to continue coping. Moreover, these 'rival' services are only superficially desirable because in the long term they offer an inferior solution. The focus is myopic since it attempts to deal with the immediate situation and ignores the fact that in such a setting the children are being deprived of the roots within their society that they will need as they grow up. It is a solution out of context. Similarly inappropriate 'solutions' that worsen the problem, have been witnessed elsewhere, for example in Somalia:

> Nothing was done to maintain and foster the child's family links, and contact with many of the families became tenuous or non-existent. Meanwhile children continued to be admitted with inadequate and often inaccurate documentation. Most serious of all, the effects of separation on the children, including some very young children, were neither understood nor, apparently, noticed ... Admission to the center offered some immediate relief from poverty and the education provided by the center was an advantage, but the long term consequences of losing their links within the community were much under-estimated or ignored.
> (*Tolfree in Save the Children 1990: p 39*)

And this in circumstances where the clan and tribal identification of individuals is of paramount significance and can mean the difference between being and not being considered 'a person'. Such examples abound, particularly it seems, in situations where children become separated from parents in famine, war, and other social disruption. The vulnerability (and malleability?) of children is, it seems, universally acknowledged. Because everyone, particularly those from outside the context, somehow feel better qualified to look after children who have not been socialised, it is not unusual to find an abundance of orphanages, boarding schools and other institutions for the 'elevation' and rescue of children.

The propensity not to acknowledge the infinitely adaptive capacity of the poor, especially in domains in which their solutions are infinitely better than ours (the concept of *orphan* is preposterous in the Somali context) is in large part a result of a tendency for programmes to 'respond' to a perceived 'situation': a kind of rejoinder to a specific set of identified 'problems'. Such an approach is typified by an inclination to 'fix' things that are perceived to be wrong or falling apart, rather than an attempt to creatively merge outside innovation and resources with local experience and procedure.

There is evidently an urgent need to question and engage in some soul searching regarding our developmental methods. A knee-jerk response to a specific stimulus may well address that particular problem adequately, but it is also likely to affect other aspects of the finely-balanced intricate membrane that constitutes the social environment and coping mechanisms. The evolution of resilient coping mechanisms has resulted in a myriad of interconnected and exquisitely interdependent responses and it should be obvious that we should, at the very least, have an inkling about what is already going on before we invent bad copies of coping mechanisms that people have evolved for themselves. It is ironic that, despite the abundance and vitality of voluntary associations, they have been completely overlooked as partners or agents in development work. Indeed, the

3. The Ugandan authorities, especially the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, are very conscious of this problem and are adamant about discouraging the establishment of orphanages.

very intimacy and familiarity that the ordinary person has with these institutions are so much a part of the social fabric that they are often not recognised or identified *even by their own members* as an integral part of the development process. In some cases these institutions are regarded as archaic and redundant even by individuals who themselves take part in activities. Perhaps it is a case of being so close to the phenomenon that one cannot see its value or focus on its potential. To some extent one also must allow for the insidious way in which people are made to feel ashamed of their cultural repertoire, so that people who are 'educated' are somehow made to feel that they must eschew or repudiate what is regarded as 'traditional'. This results in the curious phenomenon whereby people who should know better, who have personal experience of functioning traditional coping mechanisms, are the first to deny their role in ordinary life.[4]

The questions we should be asking ourselves are: what does the community do that it will continue to do regardless? What activities do people *choose* to struggle and inconvenience themselves for? What should be our attitude toward such activities, those that people have nurtured and modified through millennia? Are there ways of fusing our knowledge of the pivotal importance of ambience, stimulation and knowledge during those early precious years of childhood with the resilient and infinitely adaptive extended family? How can we ensure that 'modernisation' and 'education' are not perceived as antithical characteristics that cannot coexist harmoniously with the traditional? In what follows, we will explore some of the strengths of the traditional *socialisation* process and see what relevance, if any, these archaic institutions have.

The context: the wider implications of the socialisation process

The predicament we find ourselves in will logically lead those of us interested in the well-being of the African child and future adult to be more contextual in our strategy simply because, given the economic and statistical facts, it is the best use of resources at our disposal. It should be stressed, however, that such an approach, far from being merely a response forced upon development workers by the paucity of resources and a sense of overwhelming dismay at the challenges before us, is actually the most pertinent and promising method for achieving a holistic child development model.

A contextual approach to early childhood education, as defined above, is one that entails a thorough understanding of the process of *socialisation* (the process by which infants and young children become aware of society and their relationships with others) in the traditional setting, and a recognition of the pivotal role that the process has for the well-being and development of the child.

In their entertaining and original historical anthropology of Siaya in Kenya, Cohen and Odhiambo have painted a convincing picture of one such context that is worth quoting at some length:

> The *siwindhle* (nursery) was a building, usually indistinguishable from other domiciles in the compound, at least from outside. The interior of the *siwindhle* is recalled by those who experienced it as a structure of transition from infancy to maturity. It was within the *siwindhle* that much of the critical social intelligence of the Luo world was imparted by the *pim* (old woman) to those with little experience or knowledge of it. Children learned about the past from the *pim*. They drew upon her wisdom. They learned about the people, the groups, and the settlements around them. They learned a geography of succor and a geography of danger. They learned about sexuality, about marriage, and about childbirth. And from her wide-ranging social knowledge the *pim* was able to supply information that

4. This is clearly the case with witchcraft and witchcraft accusations which would be far more palatable if only they were not saddled with inappropriate and derogatory nomenclature which has connotations to the 'educated'. Why is it that 'social control sanctions' has more credibility than witchcraft accusations, or that recourse to homeopathy or traditional healing be less embarrassing than to a witch doctor or faith healer?

> both broadened and delimited the fields of possible and optimal marriages of her charges. From the *pim*, children learned about magic and the other powers of the world. They learned about health, illness, misfortune, and death. They learned about interest, opportunity, and obligation, factors that would both open up and restrict their lives. As the *pim* nurtured and instructed her charges, linking them with the adult world, the experience she brought from outside the enclosure neighborhood and from outside the patri-group provided the young with information extending far beyond the patrilineage, and gave them the elements of an intimate understanding of a complex and physically remote social universe. (*Cohen & Odhiambo 1989: p 93*)

Socialisation is, as this eloquent example shows, above all learning by doing (living?) and is, in essence, the process whereby the cultural system of common sense is imbibed effortlessly and semi-spontaneously. It may be that there is, on the part of the socialising agent (in this case the pim), a consciousness of an element of teaching or inducting a child or outsider, but it is not as deliberate or as formal as education would imply.[5] It is in the rivers, valleys and mountains of 'geography of succor' and the 'geography of danger' that the fundamental forming of the child is accomplished.

What does this effortless learning of common sense entail? For the most part it means that the 'teaching' is done in conjunction with living – it is not isolated out of the context of being within a community and there are no regular times nor set curricula. This is not consistent with the way children are formally 'taught' in the modern school and there is a profound difference between the context of imported *education*, which somehow evokes the notion of a rectangular structure, a teacher and a blackboard, and *socialisation*, which conjures up the image of a warm exchange in a comfortable setting. On the other hand, whenever one sees a bad pre-school or primary school, unfortunately more often than one would like, where children appear to be tended and prodded by swaggering teachers brandishing twigs, Julius Nyerere's compelling warning springs to mind: 'People are not developed when they are herded like animals into new ventures'.[6] We can and must find better ways to work in the natural context that encapsulates a process of socialisation rather than the alien world of formal education.

In writing like this, one runs the danger of being accused of painting too idyllic and naive a picture of traditional child-rearing practices and should hasten to add that to recognise strength does not mean being blind to weaknesses and defects.[7] Especially in the areas of gender-cum-ethnic and health-cum-social status issues, the traditional socialisation methods sometimes give questionable results, and improvements are both necessary and long overdue. The point is that the most propitious way to approach improved education of children is *through* existing institutions rather than merely brushing these aside.

In this context it must be stressed that, despite the tense used in the passage concerning the *siwindhle* and *pim* above, the traditional process of socialisation continues unabated. It would be a mistake to think that urbanisation, modernisation or new pressures on the extended family could ever get in the way of the normative business of acquainting children with their surroundings. Ignoring or sweeping traditional socialisation aside does not render it redundant. In fact there is evidence to suggest that when it is deliberately shunted aside it actually tends to become emblematic, thus encouraging it to be conducted surreptitiously as an unorthodox and subversive activity which has to be done to 'preserve the past'.[8] Formal education systems may, it seems, be truncated and put on hold, but socialisation is too unconscious and automatic a process to be turned off like a tap. The tenacity of socialisation cannot be underestimated, especially in the preservation of perceived culture and history in situations of dual value systems. Thus, in attempts to disregard the process of socialisation,

5. As Geertz puts it: 'Common sense wisdom is shamelessly and unapologetically *ad hoc*. It comes in epigrams, proverbs, *obiter dicta*, jokes, anecdotes, *contes morals* – a clatter of gnomic utterances – not in formal doctrines, axiomised theories, architectonic dogmas'. (1983: p 90)

6. One of the most vivid images in my mind is that of young teachers herding some pre-school children in a refugee camp from one location to another, simultaneously making them mouth revolutionary slogans.

7. Indeed, to be excessively uncritical of the traditional would imply a whiff of patronising behavior which would signal the fact that this institution was not being tested and improved in its own right.

8. A case in point is female circumcision as a rite of passage that is jealously safeguarded by older women and men in societies where it is being confronted head on. Similar evidence exists on the rise of Renamo in Mozambique because of attempts to stamp out or ignore traditional mores. (Geffray 1990)

there have been examples of strong clandestine 'counter cultures' being preserved. Many middle class and urban parents, strongly disapproving of the traditional, have found that their children have been made all too familiar with it and, what is more, that the children have learned how to disguise or hide their informal learning from the 'official' approved education that they have received. This surely is yet another reason to work with the system rather than against it.

Children will, of course, continue to be fashioned and formed by some process of socialisation that will mirror their environment. Thus, as Geertz has described it:

> The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgement, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures. Rather than attempting to place the experience of others within the framework of such a conception, which is what the extolled 'empathy' in fact usually comes down to, understanding them demands setting that conception aside and seeing their experiences within their own idea of what selfhood is.
> (*Geertz 1983: p 59*)

This idea of *selfhood* is the key to understanding the context in which socialisation makes sense of experience and history, and gradually equips a child with the tools and techniques that the child will need when she or he becomes an adult. In particular it is in this difference between perception of self as an individual, and perception of self as member of a collective, that some compromises need to be reached. If we are to play any role in contributing positively towards the development of children, it is imperative that we focus on blending the best of early childhood education and the best of what the extended family's repertoire have to offer, and that we do not fall into the trap of setting one up against the other since, in the final analysis, the two are potentially such complementary parts of the whole.

Strengths and opportunities (resources)

When we assume that people are disadvantaged, we rush to create a development programme to deal with their disadvantages, instead of a programme based on the skills people have at their fingertips ... (The) development literature largely assumes that poor people must change their attitude and behavior before they can take the first step out of poverty. Surely the inference is that poverty is a self-inflicted, self-generating phenomenon. The focus then is placed on what the poor are doing to themselves, rather than on what an oppressive economic system is doing to the poor. (*Fuglesang & Chandler 1988: p 24*)

To build on people's strengths one must appreciate and acknowledge people's proficiency and skill in everyday life. All too often, because we are unaware of people's great efforts to deal with issues, even our attempts to 'help' are doomed to undermine and frustrate their efforts. One of the problems with the skills that people have at their fingertips is that often these skills are barely recognised, particularly it seems, by the very people who own the skills, since they are not necessarily able to share what they know in a form that is easily understood or useful (Salole 1991b). Unfortunately, rather than actually encourage people in what they are doing, we have tended to undermine and thwart them by by-passing them and setting up our own institutions.

For this reason, it is imperative that development workers are trained to become sensitive to and conscious of the need to recognise and enhance people's skills and to take extreme care not to behave in a manner that is likely to dishearten or

vandalise people's efforts. A calculated effort should therefore be made to underline and stress that the poor are obliged to rely mainly on themselves and that, even in the most dire circumstances, they have resources which they can use. As Fuglesang and Chandler have pointed out, poor people tend to explore and use every possible source of energy, every resource available, in a remarkable variety of ways to maximise potential. The creativeness of the poor is masterful and observers from affluent societies have reason to feel deeply ashamed of their incompetence in the skill of resource utilisation.

Consciously or unconsciously, however, we appear to have done the opposite: rather than stand in awe of what people are able to accomplish, we have devalued and ignored it. We have systematically allowed people to feel incompetent and inadequate in raising their own children. We have allowed modern 'education' to be juxtaposed to 'traditional' in such a manner that people are actually ashamed and unsure of their intuitive skills: surely the greatest of our strengths and skills. The list of examples – from religious and spiritual beliefs to even denial of women's pivotal role in agriculture – is extremely long.

The process whereby people are made to feel their skills are inadequate is unrelenting and mortifying. One example should suffice. The Victorian ideal of the woman was that she was essentially only legitimately concerned with domestic issues. Consequently, the fact that women worked in the fields did not 'fit' the ideal and Europeans communicated their ideal through their so-called 'civilising mission' to their hapless subjects. Africans, in the colonial context, soon learned to be embarrassed by the fact that the women were key producers and efforts were made to disguise this in statistics. Today, despite the fact that women continue to be the key producers, extension services still have to be persuaded to tailor their training methodology and techniques to women farmers and mothers.[9] As the Western models began to take root, serious gaps emerged in the indigenous repertoire.[10]

To validate people's innate skills is not a complicated process. It entails the outsider being aware of the repertoire and giving it due respect and attention. To a greater or lesser extent all the so-called strengths and opportunities that are suggested below are variations of this one recurring theme: our most significant potential strength is to be familiar with the context in which development is occurring and to recognise and enhance what it is that ordinary people are already doing that is positive. In this case we must both understand the process of socialisation and we must also learn to fashion our child development agenda in such a way that it is complementary to the techniques and methodology of socialisation.

In what follows, some tentative suggestions concerning our resources are offered. It is evident that this is a far from exhaustive list of the strengths that ordinary people possess. Indeed, the whole point of this paper has been to show that people and society are able to cope with an extraordinary number of permutations, and that the coping mechanisms are both infinitely resilient and enormously adaptable. The very spontaneous character of these strengths is that they are actually measureless and defy cataloguing. The suggestions are, therefore, presented as a way of hinting at contextual and complementary ways of reinforcing the best of what is already happening.

It is ironic that even when it comes to the welfare and education of children, where it is abundantly clear that one is not talking about importing or introducing the concept of the importance of preparing children for the future, so little effort is made to reinforce positive elements. We are, after all, ideally hoping to arrive at a synthesis of modern educational methods and traditional socialisation.

9. Thus, although a great number of training institutions exist, for example in Zimbabwe, very few of these take into consideration that women farmers are not as mobile – or at least as independently mobile – as men, and that the training institutions will have need of child care facilities. Despite the facts, the image of the farmer being male persists.

10. A classic example of how gaps can occur in the traditional coping system has been described by Cohen & Odhiambo: 'In 1980, a child Obalo, fainted in Liganua. There was immediate crying and shrieking. People in the neighborhood of the child's home rushed to see what was happening. Those present did not know what to do, though there was general agreement that the child had fainted from hunger. They did not know, they did not remember, how to revive a child who had fainted from hunger. This was a period when hunger was familiar, and such periods of hunger – seeing, being with hungry people,being hungry oneself – were common enough, but the further effect of a child fainting was not within the recollected experience of those present.' (Cohen & Odhiambo 1989: p 61)

Child development on everyone's agenda

Probably the single most important resource that those of us who are interested in children's welfare have at our disposal is that we are dealing with an area which is almost universally regarded as being of great importance. The welfare of the child is already on most people's agenda (it was not invented recently!) and does not need a great deal of selling and packaging to recalcitrant participants.[11] Ironically, however, the potential implied by this is not always sufficiently appreciated.

Since we are interested here in a sphere which coincides, at least superficially, with almost everyone's approval, if not their active participation, we can be sure that we are dealing with rich traditional mechanisms which can be worked with and through. This provides the greatest potential since it means that, if we take the time to look, we will be able to find many activities which we can both recognise and enhance.

Mimicking social structure

The most obvious strength and resource that children have in Africa is the extended family. Despite strain and economic difficulties, the extended family still plays a pivotal role for the majority of urban and rural African children (including street children). The concept of children being considered as potentially valuable and integral members of the community results in them normally having multifaceted relationships with adults other than their parents. In some instances it would be appropriate to describe relations with genetic parents as loose, and to stress that there is a distinct difference between *social* kinship and *biological* kinship (consanguinity) which is sometimes difficult for outsiders to grasp.

The implications are that there are likely to be adults within the community who 'naturally' become responsible for assisting in inducting, training and generally helping children come to terms with the realities of this world. We saw this in the example of the *pim* above. With the advent of AIDS, for example, it might make much more sense to invest in training such a person to do better something already in their preserve. Adepts at *rites de passages* are usually responsible for teaching about sex and puberty and could be targets of specific factual information about AIDS. As socialising agents, they might be prepared to accept and use that information.

Mimicking primary health interventions and methodologies

Such a strategy would mean that in the domain of education we would be borrowing from the techniques and methodologies of primary health: getting communities to choose (or recognising choices that have already been made) socialisation agents and enhancing and improving their skills.[12] This notion of borrowing is important because it provides a lucid example where modern techniques and knowledge have successfully been introduced in a way that is complementary to the traditional social structure. The techniques of training traditional midwives, traditional healers, community leaders and village health workers have great relevance to those interested in extending educational methodologies to blend with the socialisation practices in a community.

Mimicking physical structure

The concept of mimicking traditional social structures can be expanded to mimicking traditional physical structures. It is clear that one of the factors placing formal education on a pedestal – and thus implying that ordinary people cannot engage in the act of communication or education – is actually the rectangular building itself.

11. In development this is not always the case since there are often different agendas, some of which posit the development worker directly opposed to the beneficiary. (Salole 1991b)

12. Examples would be developing a combined approach with, say, a *pim* about AIDS education, or discussing with a traditional healer about how child psychologists deal with traumatised children.

There is currently a crusade for early childhood buildings to be established. Are these centres just a fashionable imported fad or is there a demonstrable need? Can traditional child rearing practices be blended with modern educational tools? Can they be made complementary to, or supportive of, the traditional context? If children's development is deemed to necessitate actual physical structures (rather than just appropriate space and environment) is it also obligatory that these be built in a manner that implies their association with the outside 'modern' world rather than in a way that links them to an association with the traditional? If we want to make early childhood education centres that reinforce the positive and that invoke, for adults and children alike, the informal socialisation setting, it might improve results to build physical structures in a way that reinforces the family and tradition. Constructing them with local materials and building them in ways that resemble people's home settings might give more satisfactory results. At the very least, it will demonstrate that parents are skilled and able: they will after all be using methods in which they are expert. It will also place the transaction of 'education' into a conceptual context where it might cease to be perceived as a mysterious process whereby the 'schooled' pass on modern learning to the 'unschooled' and become something that is understood and treated as part of the normative socialisation process. Of course, terminology that evokes 'socialisation' rather than 'education' might do the same trick. One would thus discourage the building of 'modern' early childhood education structures that mimic school buildings, and instead encourage buildings which evoke the hamlet setting.[13]

Children as a synthesis of socialising agent and teacher

It is ironic that one of the strengths that the African rural and urban context offers – numerous children – is often presented as one of its greatest weaknesses or burdens. This is not the place for a discussion on family planning but it is, nevertheless, incongruous that usually the sheer number of children is seen exclusively as a great 'burden' on Africa by outside commentators without understanding the context whereby parents are obliged to have large numbers of children. This perspective has become so embedded in the way that Africa is perceived that it is now the standard ready-made 'solution' in North America and Europe to 'Africa's problems'. It is, of course, possible to turn this truism on its head and look at the advantages that having relatively large numbers of children presents.

The fact that there are many children together means that people are used to them and have to contend with them. There is, so to speak, a *place* for children in the society: they are a normal part of the fabric and they tend to be surrounded by other children almost constantly.

This offers enormous possibilities in terms of children helping in the socialisation process. Again it should be stressed that this is not a new or imported idea but a recognition of what happens intuitively and naturally all the time. Children are part of the socialisation process everywhere, yet opportunities to allow them to play a role in 'teaching' are rarely sought. A few years ago, for example, I was involved in a project which was putting hand pumps in remote villages in Ethiopia. The pumps required a certain amount of maintenance and a scheme to train individuals to maintain the pumps had failed because of the mobility of such individuals. It was then suggested that children in schools could be taught how to perform basic repairs and maintenance. This would mean that the skills would remain in the community and that they would be readily available. Unfortunately, the engineers refused to train children because they foresaw them dismantling the pumps just to experiment with them and the experiment was never tried. To recognise the role that children have in the socialisation and education processes entails trusting them to behave responsibly and taking measures to acknowledge and legitimise this formally.

13. It is significant, in this context, that recent anthropological research should hint at 'expressive space' with a distinct socialisation purpose even in the Great Zimbabwe enclosure. (Huffman: 1984)

Women, mothers, teachers and socialisers.

The female perspective rarely emerges in studies and monographs. The absence of a female world view can similarly be noted in many development projects (Rosaldo & Lamphere). During my own anthropological fieldwork I was often told by men that 'women were interested in different things' than men. Women, going one step further, often declared that they 'thought differently' and operated on a different level than their menfolk. As one woman put it:

> A man's ideas are started from when he was small; it's the mother's fault. He is happy and we must understand that it is difficult to change him. A woman is meant to understand everything. What a woman understands in one day takes a man a week!

I certainly came away with the impression that there is another, different world view for each of the sexes and, as Ardener (1972) has suggested, both male and female ethnographers have tended to approach their field research from a male perspective. Most accounts of women have tended to dwell on the woman's role in the domestic domain. Although many commentators have stressed the fact that mothers are exclusively in charge of children's preparation for adult life, they have sometimes seriously underestimated the significance of this. I found, for example, that women exercised total control over oral tradition and the mechanisms of social control. The mother was the person who was able, for example, to determine what constituted an offence to honour and was the person who ultimately decided to initiate and terminate a vendetta. She mediated regularly between preserving the family's honour and her son's manhood, and safeguarding the continuation or viability of the domestic group. This responsibility for socialisation compelled women to get involved in village politics despite the pretence that they were not interested in politics, which they scorned as 'men's play'.

Most importantly, it was they who personified the culmination of both the 'traditional' and the 'modern' and were most prepared to deal with the educational curriculum that their children were offered.

I would suggest that the female world view is particularly bound up with the survival strategies and coping mechanisms of the poor and that this is a great asset when it comes to the education of children. The female world view may, in one sense, be regarded as a counter view, an alternative to the officially sanctioned one. It would be particularly important to try to understand that world view and to find ways of combining these perspectives into a coherent whole.

It is also true that women appear to have no time in which they can legitimately relax, and that leisure time has to be taken during the course of daily routine. One way to achieve more legitimate leisure time, or simply to cut down the hours that poor women work, would be to build on some traditional male preserves in the socialisation of the young. For example, since some socialisation in pastoralist societies is seen as purely a male prerogative, could some early child formation activities (for example, animal husbandry) be introduced in such a way that adult males were more engaged in the teaching process? In this context, it is even more important to recognise that men's skills should be an integral and explicit part of the child's training. There should be ways of offering males a normative role in the development of children. This can only be achieved through a conscious effort to identify and acknowledge skills that men have already acquired. Levi-Strauss describes, for example, the skills associated with making bows:

> The lowliest skills ... require highly complex manual and intellectual operations that must be understood and mastered, and that call for taste, intelligence, and initiative every time they are performed. Not

> just any tree can supply the wood for the bow, nor any part of the right tree; the exposure of the trunk, the month and the day for chopping down the tree are also important. The operations of hewing, shaping, and polishing the wood, of preparing the fiber for the binding and the bowstring, and of twisting and fastening these – all require experience, judgement, and flair. A man devotes himself body and soul to these tasks, investing in them his knowledge, his skill, his personality. (*Levi-Strauss 1985: p 276*)

These are skills that, if transferred to children, can help both in bonding children to their fathers as well as passing on necessary disciplines that can be useful later in life. The trick is how to persuade teachers that the men have something unique to offer in the early development of the child.

Conclusion

> The economic and social character of the family household defines children's well-being, activities, play and value systems as well as the responsibilities of the family toward them. But the African extended family system is now more nebulous and its responsibilities range between traditional and 'modern' approaches. In contemporary Africa, the family role in educating children, for example, has diminished with the introduction of formal education systems, some of whose features are inherited from the colonial period, but which may include 'traditional cultural' training. (*Rosemary Nabatanzi in Save the Children 1990: p 67*)

Throughout this paper the recurrent theme has been that the everyday socialisation process that unconsciously takes place around a child is too significant a phenomenon to be ignored. As Nabatanzi makes clear in the passage above, modern education systems have been insensitive or hostile to tradition and culture, partly as a legacy of colonialism,[14] and have more or less driven the traditional cultural socialisation process underground. We are still faced with a tendency to posit the 'modern' against the 'traditional' as if the two are doomed to be locked in perpetual dialectic. We continue to sustain the myth that what is happening in the socialisation process is somehow different (thus ensuring, of course, that it remains inferior in our minds) from what takes place in the classroom. We anticipate, through the Convention on Children's Rights, a distant future when Africa's children will have access to universal education. But we do not take the steps necessary to ensure the harmonious holistic development of the child: a combination of 'traditional' and 'modern'. This bias needs careful analysis and questioning. There is, in short, a need for a deeper and more intimate understanding of the invisible social fabric that holds society together. Once the context is well understood, then the ability to use the institutions developed expressly for child development (such as *pim*s and other socialisation agents) will follow from it. A conviction of the need for a marriage between modern educational methods and inherent socialisation practices is a natural product of seeing the strengths that people have already.

In a study on the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, Fuglesang & Chandler (1988: p 27) state bluntly that the point is simple: a self reliant, endogenous development can be generated only from the skill resource base people already have. In order for us to strengthen our skills for child development we need to learn how to give value and recognition to what is already taking place. The problem is multifaceted, not only at family level and at community level – where people have been made to feel that they have nothing to offer their children in this 'modern' world – but also at the social services, health and education levels where the crisis in child development.

14. Whilst colonialism can be blamed for much of the problem, it is sometimes African civil servants and educationalists who appear to be most intransigent in their commitment to the 'modern' educational system.

The basic skills are there. It is simply that they are not appreciated and that their potential role in a modern world is not seriously contemplated. As we have seen, the family and the community have received the oblique message that their role is redundant. They have also learned that in the modern world their children need access to the 'official' world that can only come from submitting them to an alien process which sometimes returns their children to them either incapable or disdainful of work in the fields. Changes in perspective are called for within the education, health and social services and at decision making and policy levels. In particular, teacher training institutions must develop respect for traditional practices so that new teachers embarking on this exciting profession cease to think of themselves as the ones with knowledge and are sensitive to other socialising agents within the community. Ideally they should learn from and emulate traditional structures so that the knowledge and experience of ordinary people does not continue to be undervalued and despised. The barriers between 'formal' and 'informal' education must, at the very least, be reassessed, and the oblique rejection of traditional skills curtailed. The natural process whereby people will mimic their own traditional structures should be actively encouraged (possible by finding a niche for such experimental activities in the formal school system) as a genuine effort to reinforce and strengthen the existing structure and (would it be too much to hope?), perhaps giving it new life by adding to or modifying it.

If the strength of the African community lies in its finely tuned and balanced socialisation of the young, it is surely in keeping with modern pedagogic theory to evoke and use that gentle and unobtrusive socialisation. The alternative is to ignore it and instead, emulate the alien and formal school teaching mode which effectively denies ordinary parents their rightful role in the upbringing of their children.

The training of educators is a particular issue because classic teacher training still seems to give teachers a sense that they know best. It might make for spectacular improvement if we followed Levi-Strauss's suggestion that:

> Our educators have, thus, to become amateur anthropologists of a society that is other than the one to which they apply the methods they once learned. But even if new methods spark a child's interest in what he does, and help him to understand and enjoy what he is taught rather than memorize it, then the traditional goal of school will remain the same. The child will still have to learn – more effectively and intelligently than before no doubt, but he will still have to assimilate knowledge and other acquisitions of the past.
> (*Levi-Stauss 1985: p 273*)

Finally, by way of conclusion, it may be necessary to reiterate that all the arguments above have been presented to provoke a way of thinking and to raise some questions about the way we perceive our strengths, rather than to give finite answers. The strength of communities lies fundamentally in their ability to adapt and improvise in a particular milieu and it should be stressed that an appropriate contextual solution in one instance may not be the same in another where, superficially, the problem or 'situation' appears to be the same.[15] There are no recipes that will work everywhere, only the methodology remains the same. One must observe and listen, as Pantin says: 'Not in the abstracted, perfunctory manner of one who is just humoring a child, but with the single-minded intentness of an advocate hanging on to each word of a key witness'.

15 One embarrassing example of this: In 1983, a couple of us were involved in nutrition surveys amongst the Hamar and Dassaneth in southwest Ethiopia. We knew that there had been a sustained drought and expected to find the same nutritional problems that were being experienced further to the north. Because of our mind-set of how children were treated in food shortage situations further north we focused at first exclusively on the status of children. Indeed, the survey was, if anything, the final proof before intervening with food. It was only after about a week or so of very intense surveys that we came across the real reasons why we were not encountering major malnutrition amongst the children: older members of the community, widows and others, were actually depriving themselves of food and therefore we had been looking in the wrong place for signs of malnutrition.

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